



ROBERT CARMACK in 1910.



DAISY CARMACK in 1910.

R.W. Carmack

Adventurous pioneer found wealth and success in grocery and real estate market in Camas

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To say that the Oregon Trail pioneers were great adventurers would have to be an understatement. Pulling up roots on the East Coast and in the Midwest, hitching their dreams to a wagon train and finding success at the end of the rainbow took foresight and courage.

Some of the early pioneers went west with such confidence that it seemed to be "the natural thing to do." And changing locations once they got there was equally as easy. Such a man was Robert Wiley Carmack who not only came west but encouraged and pestered his friends to do likewise. When things didn't work out in one town, he came to Camas and found happiness and success.

Robert Wiley Carmack was born Aug. 17, 1877, in California, Ky., to George W. Carmack and Sammie E. Carmack. The Carmack family lived in Cold Springs, Ky., which is about 20 miles south of Cincinnati, Ohio. George W. Carmack was of Irish-Scottish descent, his spirited ancestors leaving the British Isles under duress sometime before. His father, George W. Carmack Sr., had married Martha D. Washington, who had her own family, historic roots, as the niece of the first United States president, George Washington. (Martha's father was George's brother.)

George and Sammie Carmack had nine children, including Robert. First came Emma in 1872, who died two years later in 1874. Then, Richard, born in 1874, Anna Maude in 1876, Robert in 1877, Elta in 1879, Frank in 1880, Alice in 1882, Harvard in 1888, and Mary Traver in 1894. Sadly, Robert and his brothers and sisters received only rudimentary educations in their early years, probably because of their large family and hard times. Thirsting for knowledge and books, Robert left home at the young age of 12 to seek his fortune (and education) away from Cold Springs.

Although still a child, Robert was an adventuresome sort, heading out of state to Minnesota and farming country. He was able to get a job doing farm work in Minnesota for a couple of years, and, at 14, was fortunate to meet a wealthy, farming couple named "Weaver" who owned a large ranch in Elton, Ill. The Weavers took to young Carmack immediately, and asked him to come work on their ranch. During the next few years, he stayed with the Weavers, almost like an adopted son. When he wasn't busy with farm chores, he tried to better himself educationally, by reading every book the Weavers had available, and soon became known as a "book hound." Thus began what was to be a life-long love affair with books for R.W. Carmack, who truly became a self-educated man.

In 1901, when he was 24, Robert felt it was time to move on to higher aspirations. He reluctantly bid the Weavers a fond goodbye (although he stayed in touch with them throughout his whole lifetime), and moved to Ceylon, Minn., where he obtained a temporary position at First National Bank of Ceylon. It was there he met his lifelong friend, Oscar Franklin Johnson, who was also employed at the bank.

As their friendship grew, O.F. Johnson introduced Robert Carmack to one of his attractive, young nieces—a woman who was later to become Robert's first wife. Robert Carmack had a restless nature, and when stories of excellent entrepreneurial opportunities in the new state of Washington reached Minnesota, he said goodbye to his friends and headed west. The year was 1906.

Success in the west didn't come immediately to Robert Carmack. Upon arrival in Mount Vernon, Wash., he took a job at an Anacortes sawmill, and later joined a logging camp in the mountains. He then became an engineer in a Kent sawmill, south of Seattle, biding his time for the opportunity to go into business for himself. That opportunity materialized a few months later when he invested the money he had saved into some Kennewick land, which included a small grocery store in Kent. Robert had finally realized his ambition "to be his own boss." However, even then, Carmack knew that real money was made in real estate, and in his own words (in a Sept. 6, 1908, letter to O.F. Johnson, also quoted later in this story) "land profits paid better than working."

Being a smart businessman with broad vision, Carmack realized that the banking business in Washington state was also expanding at a rapid pace. So, he wrote his friend, O.F. Johnson, and urged him to come west. Johnson had done well for himself at the Ceylon bank, and in addition, was engaged to lovely Beatrice "Amelia" Bauman, an assistant teller. For that reason, it took an immense amount of persuasion on the part of Robert Carmack to talk his friend into coming to Seattle. Finally, however, Johnson realized that this was a rare opportunity to better himself in the banking industry, so he took a leave of absence and headed west.

As Bob Carmack had predicted, it took no time at all for O.F. to obtain a banking position in Aberdeen, Wash., making double the salary he had in Ceylon. Only when he was well settled in his new position, did he send for Amelia.

O.F. Johnson and Amelia Bauman were married in 1907, and rented a small house at F and Third streets in Aberdeen. Their good friend, bachelor, Bob Carmack, sublet a room from the Johnsons for \$10 per month.

Observing the Johnsons' wedded bliss, 30-year-old Carmack began to feel that he, also, was ready for marriage. So, he sent for O.F. Johnson's niece, and they were wed when she arrived in Kent. The newly-married couple quickly settled down, and together ran the general store until the new Mrs. Carmack got pregnant, and gave birth to a son in 1908.

In a Sept. 6, 1908, letter from Kent, Wash., to dear friend O.F. Johnson in Aberdeen, R.W. Carmack describes his new bornson: "he will soon be big enough to go to school. We haven't named him yet, can't think of any name good enough." In the same letter, Carmack goes on to say "I recently sold my store for a \$700 profit. I also traded my Kennewick land for a store

four miles east of Kent, in a town called "Christopher." Washington. Most of the trade at my new store will be with the Japanese, with some white customers. The stock in the new store invoiced at \$2,800, but I had to order almost \$1,000 more goods right away. We have a good trade in feed and flour and groceries. Also, cloth and hardware. I have the post office and have charge of the Northern Pacific depot! Quite a step up for a self-educated young man.

The Carmacks moved to Christopher and the two-story wooden general store, which was called "T.S. Harvey's." Bob Carmack renamed his new business "R.W. Carmack Gen'l. Merchandise, Hardware, Flour & Feed." The fast-paced growth of the area, plus Bob Carmack's talent for merchandising, soon paid off. His store's business increased, with larger profits each month.

Unfortunately, the success of Carmack's marriage did not match the success of his store. The Carmacks soon divorced, with Mrs. Carmack gaining custody of their son. (Very little is known of this marriage and the first Mrs. Carmack, who at this writing, 84 years later, remains a complete "mystery" to the family).

Alone and emotionally drained, Robert Carmack poured himself into his business, and by 1910, the "R.W. Carmack Gen'l. Merchandise Store" in Christopher, Wash., was a well-known fixture in that part of the state.

Meanwhile in Aberdeen, O.F. Johnson was formulating new plans. A man of great vision, he dreamed of owning and operating his own bank. He made a list of possible cities in Washington and Oregon, and his top choice was the newly-incorporated town of Camas on the Columbia River. He and Amelia subsequently moved there in 1908, and with financial help from his father-in-law, Emil Bauman, O.F. Johnson built a fine, new brick bank building at the corner of Fourth and Cedar streets. He called his bank "Camas State Bank." Johnson became the first teller at the new, little bank, and Amelia was his assistant.

By mid-year, 1910, with business booming in Camas, and the town growing at a rapid pace, O.F. Johnson wrote a stirring letter of invitation to his friend, Bob Carmack. His invitation was: If Carmack would move to the thriving paper mill town and enter into the grocery business, Johnson would furnish him with a small, 100 x 100 foot store building to the west of the

bank on Northeast Fourth Street. The current business at that location was "Camas Grocery Store," and the store owners were anxious to sell.

Carmack promised to come take a look-see. In a postcard dated Nov. 20, 1910, from Christopher, Wash., R.W. Carmack wrote the Johnsons in Camas: "Dear friends, Will try and come to see you Wednesday night about 8:00 P.M. Don't look for me until you see me R.W.C."

Although Carmack was firmly established at his general store in Christopher, and had been courting a very lovely young nurse from Tacoma, named Daisy Wilhite, he took his friend's advice and made a visit to Camas. When he arrived, he was impressed with the tidy building and good location, plus the busy, bustling, newly-incorporated city. Carmack found it impossible to resist Johnson's generous offer, and also knew how nice it would be to see his best friend, O.F. Johnson, on a regular basis.

So, in May of 1911, Bob Carmack sold his store with all its goods in Christopher, and moved to Camas. He purchased the Camas Grocery, renaming it "Carmack's Camas Grocery." Although there were two other general merchandise stores in town (MacMasters and Farrells), Carmack decided to concentrate primarily on groceries, the freshest and best he could find.

With his business off to a good start, Robert could turn his thoughts to unfinished business up in Tacoma. The hardest part about moving to Camas had been leaving Daisy Wilhite behind. When Robert Carmack left Tacoma, he resolved being away from Daisy was only a temporary situation, for he intended to return as soon as possible, and make Daisy Wilhite his bride.

Daisy Wilhite was born in Milan, Mo., the daughter of Benjamin and Melinda Wilhite. Her schooling was received in Nebraska.

Once Daisy Wilhite had finished her schooling in Nebraska, she moved to Tacoma to live with her sister, Viola, who was married to Roy Kellum. She took a position as a nurse, and when she was 21, met R.W. (Rob) Carmack. (Daisy's life-long pet name for her husband was "Rob," most others called him "Bob.")

Daisy was a high-spirited, spunky woman enjoyed life, and Robert was immediately

On July 24, 1912, a lovely baby daughter, Beatrice Melinda Carmack, was born to Robert and Daisy at a Vancouver hospital. Two years later on Aug. 6, 1914, they had a son, James Robert Carmack, who was delivered on the kitchen table of their home. Carmack's fortunes continued to improve and he began to invest in real estate, buying several lots on Northeast Third Avenue

attracted. Daisy, in turn, was completely intrigued by the handsome, adventuresome Carmack. When she and Rob were parted by Carmack's move to Camas, Daisy in her wise way knew that indeed, this was true love, and it would be just a matter of time before they joined him. The couple were soon married.

Moving to Camas was just another bit of excitement for Daisy. Although Camas lacked the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Tacoma, she immediately like the small, but busy community.

With all the increased business, Carmack's Camas Grocery on Northeast Fourth Avenue soon became too small, and larger wooden structure was completed by Johnson to the north of the Camas State Bank on Burton Street. This larger building became Carmack's new location which he called "Carmack's Camas Mercantile Company." The Burton Street store employed eight clerks, and Carmack delivered his goods by several horse drawn wagons (drays).

between Garfield and Hayes. He contracted with John Roffler to build three houses on these lots, and moved his family to one of the houses until 1920. Today, the houses are no longer there, making room several years ago for Zion Lutheran Church.

In 1919, Robert and Daisy asked Daisy's brother, O.J. Wilhite, who was a general contractor, to build them a home at what is now 1828 N.W. Sixth. Carmack had purchased a large parcel of land west of town, with the knowledge that the proposed North Bank Highway would soon be the main route east and west through Camas. In 1919, workmen were trying to complete the Camas to Vancouver link which ran through Carmack's new property (later known as the Carmack Addition). Rob and Daisy decided that a prime location for their planned home would be on a knoll, overlooking the highway.

The new Carmack house was a spacious two-story structure with many large windows facing north, including a bay window on the lower elevation.

In 1923, R.W. Carmack sold his Burton Street mercantile store to W.C. Mansfield and moved with his family to Los Angeles, where he intended to retire. Los Angeles turned out to be a disappointment for the family, who dearly missed the pleasantness of living in Camas. A few months after their California arrival, the Carmack family packed up and drove to San Francisco, catching the steamer north to Portland and home.

When he returned to Camas, Carmack was shocked to discover that three weeks

after selling his store to Mansfield, half of the Camas downtown business district had gone up in smoke. A terrible fire had raged through three blocks of wooden buildings, burning all in its path, including O.F. Johnson's corner brick bank building.

Undaunted, Johnson rebuilt his buildings on Fourth Avenue and Burton Street. This time, he used only the best of fire-resistant materials. At the old Carmack Mercantile location, another new brick building was constructed, which became the location of Carmack's new business "R.W. Carmack, Real Estate and Insurance."

At about the same time, Carmack was persuaded to invest in a puncture-proof inner tube company, with his partners being a physician, Dr. Carlos Frie, and Wilmer Swank, successful owner of the largest furniture store in town. The deal was if the company didn't make it, R.W. would get his money back. The inner tube business went downhill fast, and when R.W. Carmack wanted out, Ure and Swank didn't have the cash. So, Ure and Swank gave Carmack a 100 foot x 100 foot lot of land on the southeast corner of Northeast Fourth Avenue and Burton, across the street from Swank's furniture store.

It was on this corner lot, that R.W. Carmack had his brother-in-law, O.J. Wilhite, build the beautiful, stately Carmack Building in 1923. There was six apartments on the second floor and store and office space on the ground floor. Carmack moved his real estate business into a ground floor location of the new building, and Camas

Home Laundry and the Camas Stage Company took over the Johnson Building located on Cedar Street.

Although during this time, a picture was taken of Daisy Carmack and Pearl (Mrs. W.C.) Mansfield picketing for women's rights on the steps of City Hall. Daisy was definitely a woman who was ahead of her time. Together with her friends, Gladys Carleton (Spouse Reitz manager), Hani Michaelis (Ideal Corner), and educators, Nora Self and Irene Roffler, they made sure that the "woman's rights" message was heard loud and clear in Camas during the 1920s and 1930s. Although Pearl, Daisy, Gladys and Hani's "formidable" husbands were better known, and more often written about, these early ladies were clearly the "real" power behind the throne.

Bob Carmack had always been involved in the community, later becoming president of the Camas School Board, a special honor for him because of his difficult educational beginnings. James Robert Carmack graduated from high school in 1931, and was awarded a scholarship to Whitman College. Unable to attend, he worked at the mill, taking University of Oregon extension courses. In 1935, he was finally able to begin his Whitman studies, and the following year entered the University of Washington.

By 1932, R.W. Carmack Real Estate and Insurance was doing so well that Daisy devoted most of her time helping to manage the thriving business. The Carmacks de-

cided to build another building next door, which they also leased out. Besides the Carmack Addition, there was Midland Acres, an area of homes surrounding today's One Stop Shopping Center. There was also Weir Park, where lots were sold for \$400 with an agreement to build a double garage for \$200 more. Most of the double garages became prominent homes.

When R.W.'s health began to fail in 1935, Daisy took over management of the properties, and by 1936, James had to quit college and return home to assume a more active role at the real estate firm.

On Nov. 11, 1937, Beatrice married Horace W. Cl... who worked for Standard Oil Company's Portland office.

One year after Beatrice's marriage, on Oct. 13, 1938, R.W. Carmack died at the age of 61. He had been in ill health for over two years, but had maintained his post as chairman of the Camas School Board during the period of his illness. He also continued to serve as secretary of the Camas Cooperative Creamery and was a member of the Camas Kiwanis club at the time of his death. Robert Wiley Carmack suffered a heart attack, passing away quietly at his home in the Carmack Addition.

In 1943, during World War II, Daisy moved out of the family home and into one of the apartments above the store.

Daisy later bought a small, English cottage-style home at the corner of Northeast Fourth and Everett, next to the old city hall and current library. Daisy shared the residence for a time with her recently-divorced daughter Beatrice and her granddaughter Barbara Ann. And, it was at this house in January of 1946, that James Robert Carmack married the very beautiful Juanita Corienne (Joni) Yount, daughter of Ella and Dick Yount from Missouri.

James and Joni Carmack raised a family of four children—April Orso, Victoria, Loyd and Robert Hadley Carmack, who was named after his grandfather.

The Carmack grandchildren delight in telling of their visits to Grandma Daisy. The exterior of Daisy's house was finished in thousands of pebbles imbedded in the cement. If the grandchildren picked out certain favorite stones, Daisy would immediately go outside and pry them away with a knife, giving them to the children as "treasures."

Daisy continued to live in her "pebble" house, close to her many friends (including the Johnsons), until her death on July 21, 1955, 17 years after her husband's death. Although her tombstone is located next to R.W. and Beatrice Carmack's in the Camas Cemetery, there is no birth date recorded.

Throughout her entire life, Daisy never divulged her age and there was great speculation in town about just how old Daisy Carmack was. Daisy had the last laugh on all those people who teased to the Camas Cemetery to find out.

The "pebble" house is owned today by the City of Camas and used as its Building Department headquarters.

After Daisy's death, the Carmack Building went to son, James, while the building next door, was willed to daughter Beatrice.

James Carmack successfully continued with the business his father had begun so many years before, real estate, insurance, and now housing developments. During the 1960s, the business was renamed "Camas Realty and Carmack Insurance," for easier identification by new residents to the area.

Beatrice Carmack married Paul Christensen who had a son from a previous marriage. They were married for several years, losing Paul's son to an accident during that time. Barbara Ann grew up and got married. Beatrice and Paul later divorced, and Beatrice married Frank Masco. When Beatrice died in 1988, she was buried as Beatrice Carmack Masco, between her parents at the Camas Cemetery.

In 1989, after the death of Joni Carmack's mother, Ella, in Camas, the James Carmacks moved to Sun City West, Ariz., to enjoy the year-long sunshine.